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Ensuring English Language Learners' Success: Balancing Teacher Quantity with Quality

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The success of our education system is fully reliant on the presence in our schools of high-quality teachers for all students. Estimates suggest, however, that there continues to be a profound teacher shortage; some two million new teachers will be needed over the next ten years. Primary reasons cited for the shortage are that more teachers are reaching retirement age today than at anytime in the last five decades, while nearly 30% of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

At the same time, the number of students in our schools who are English language learners (ELLs, also known as limited English proficient or LEP students) has been growing at an average annual rate five times that of the total enrollment (National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1999). While advances have been made to promote the effective education of ELLs, the body of teachers most qualified to meet their needs has been unable to match their growth. As efforts are made to satisfy the ongoing demand for new teachers prepared to work with this population of students, they must balance the need for quantity with an emphasis on quality.

The Shortage of Teachers for ELLs

Although recent changes in demographics dictate that half of all teachers may anticipate educating an English language learner during their career (McKeon, 1994), currently only 2.5% of teachers who instruct ELLs possess a degree in English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education; only 30% of all teachers with English language learners in their classrooms have received any professional development in teaching these students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

In 1994, the General Accounting Office reported a shortage of 175,000 bilingual teachers (General Accounting Office, 1994). In their survey of large urban school districts, the Urban Teacher Collaborative found the following:

At the elementary level ... Bilingual educators are also in immediate demand (67.5%), as are English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers (60%) (The Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000, p. 5).

Research argues that teachers who share the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students are better able to identify and serve their needs. In 1992, however, when almost one half of ELLs were Hispanic, 93% of their teachers were non-Hispanic whites (Fleischman & Hopstock 1993). Today, the number of Hispanic students majoring in education is declining faster than the overall decline in education majors. At the current rate of decline, a ratio of only 5% minority teachers to 40% minority students could be a reality early in this century.

The shortage of qualified teachers is most extreme in urban areas, where the majority of ELLs reside. A severe shortage of teachers in these urban districts threatens to exacerbate conditions where the waiver of teaching requirements has become common practice. In 1999, two-thirds of the 54 largest urban school districts reported an immediate demand for K-6 bilingual teachers. Over 80 percent of the same districts reported allowing non-credentialed teachers to teach (The Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000).

Earlier concerns about an impending teacher shortage in the early 1980s prompted the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) *Teacher Demand and Shortage* survey, which was carried out over the 1987-88, 1990-91 and 1993-94 school years. It found that the number of full-time teaching positions that went unfilled during that period actually declined — because teachers were increasingly teaching subjects outside of their field of specialization and because many were hired without the proper certification. During the 1990-91 school year, for example, 71% of secondary school students in high poverty districts were taught physical science by a teacher lacking at least a minor in the field (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). These findings indicate that school districts respond to this shortage of qualified teachers by lowering their standards for entering the teaching profession.

The Significance of High Quality Teachers

At a time when students are expected to achieve to higher standards than ever before, the need for high quality teachers in our public schools is of increasing concern. In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future exposed many of the problems concerning the quality of public school teachers in the United States, particularly with regard to their preparation to teach, and galvanized a renewed belief in the important role that teachers play in student achievement. They write:

Roughly ¼ of newly hired American teachers lack the qualifications for their jobs. More than 12% of new hires enter the classroom without any formal training at all, and another 14% arrive without fully meeting state standards (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 9).

The National Commission's report identifies teacher expertise as the "single most important factor" in predicting student achievement, and found that fully trained teachers are far more effective than teachers who are not prepared (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p.12). In the wake of the Commission's report, much research has been generated in support of the notion that teachers can and do make a difference in student achievement. For example, Linda Darling-Hammond and Deborah Ball found that teachers' education, certification, knowledge and experience are measures of their effectiveness; well-prepared teachers affected student outcomes as much as socioeconomic factors (Darling-Hammond & Ball, 1998, p. 2).

A recent study by the Education Trust emphasizes the influence of teachers' deep content knowledge on teacher effectiveness. The Education Trust analyzed research findings from Tennessee, Texas, Massachusetts and Alabama to draw the following conclusion:

The difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year (Education Trust, 1998, p. 3).

In addition to offering further support for the importance of teachers' content knowledge and basic skills, the Education Trust posits that the third key criterion for teacher effectiveness is their ability to teach what they know. However, there is little research identifying the knowledge and skills that teachers must possess to be effective.

Directions in Ensuring High-Quality Teachers for ELLs

Even though researchers have yet to agree upon the best assessment of what new teachers know and are able to do, many agree that current teacher preparation and testing practices are not good enough. In a climate of accountability to the high standards that states and school districts have set for students and their teachers, teacher assessment and licensure has become a target for national reform efforts, along with teacher preparation and ongoing professional development designed to ensure high quality teaching staff.

State Licensure of Bilingual/ESL Teachers

State licensure requirements are currently a primary gatekeeper to ensure the quality of new teachers for ELLs in our public schools. However, 12 states require neither ESL nor bilingual education certification or endorsement (McKnight & Antunez, 1999). In spite of a significant population of ELLs in Pennsylvania, for example, teachers of these students are not required by the state to have received bilingual education or ESL preparation. Only a minority of the School District of Philadelphia's ESL or bilingual education teachers were prepared to teach ELLs prior to entering the classroom - despite the fact that the district currently enrolls over 10,000 English language learners. Furthermore, the national shortage of ESL and bilingual teachers acts as a disincentive to this and other states to require licensure in this area, as states and districts would then need to grapple with even greater difficulties filling vacancies.

In states that do have licensure requirements for teachers of ELLs, researchers acknowledge problems with the testing practices employed. The issue is not limited to teachers of ELLs; tests used to assess all new teachers have received a great deal of criticism. The problems identified include:

- Only 29 states require teachers to take tests in the subject area they will teach (*Education Week*, 2000).
- Tests do not certify that teachers have the breadth and depth of subject knowledge to teach all students to high standards and are inadequate to measure teaching skill. The majority of tests are multiple-choice assessments of basic skills, dominated by high-school level material with no evidence of content at the baccalaureate level (Education Trust, 1999).
- Numerous loopholes exist: Certain states require that prospective teachers only answer half of the questions on teacher exams correctly (Education Trust, 1999), states allow new teachers into the classroom who have failed licensure exams, states that require teachers to pass exams in the subject areas they will teach can waive those requirements, and districts can hire new teachers who have not met licensure requirements through emergency certification (*Education Week*, 2000).

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

The current shortage of teachers, particularly teachers for English language learners, places new demands on teacher preparation and inservice professional development programs to cultivate a pool of teachers able to effectively teach a diverse population of students. Not only must such programs respond to the demand for teachers in innovative ways, quality must remain at the core of program goals.

Current approaches acknowledge that professional development is not a “one-shot” process, but is best when sustained over time. Teacher inquiry, or the “teacher-as-learner,” offers teachers the opportunity to gather the data they need to reflect on their practice. This critical reflection process is fostered when teachers work collaboratively, as part of “learning communities,” so that they can learn from and challenge each other (Little, 1993).

The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) has applied these theories of professional development to teachers of ELLs in their model, *Teachers' Learning Communities*. Margarita Calderón offers supports for CRESPAR's peer coaching approach in the following passage:

By creating a culture of inquiry through ethnography, professional learning becomes more focused and accelerated. With the tools of “teacher ethnography,” the teams of monolingual and bilingual teachers can learn about their teaching by observing the students and their partner, and can draw closer together. Change becomes meaningful, relevant, and necessary. Although these professional development programs are still in development, studies have demonstrated that continuous learning by teachers is bringing about instructional program refinement and greater student gains. (Calderón, 1997, p. 10)

Training for teachers of language minority students must go beyond incorporation of research on effective professional development to also provide teachers with the knowledge and understanding of content and language learning that is necessary to meet the specific needs of these learners. The critical elements of that understanding are identified in the following:

Teachers need to understand basic constructs of bilingualism and second language development, the nature of language proficiency, the role of the first language and culture in learning, and the demands that mainstream education places on culturally diverse students (Clair, 1993). Teachers need to continually reassess what schooling means in the context of a pluralistic society; the relationships between teachers and learners; and attitudes and beliefs about language, culture, and race (Clair, Adger, Short & Millen, 1998; González & Darling-Hammond, 1997). Moreover, teachers need a “vision of students as capable individuals for whom limited English proficiency does not signify deficiency and for whom limited academic skills do not represent an incurable situation” (Walqui, 1999). Finally, promising professional development in culturally diverse schools assumes that combining content, ESL, and bilingual teachers would make complementary knowledge and perspectives available to everyone (Clair & Adger, 1999).

Clearly, the demands placed upon teachers of ELLs are great. Not only must these

teachers possess the deep subject-matter knowledge required in order for ELLs to meet grade-level content standards, but they must also possess the pedagogy to enable these students to access the knowledge and skills contained in the standards, and they must have a thorough understanding of their students' language acquisition process.

Standards for Teachers of ELLs

While much further research is needed, there is a growing body of knowledge defining the attributes of high-quality teaching for all students. Promising teacher preparation and professional development programs are based upon what we know about effective teaching (Rueda, 1998), and several groups have now delineated these attributes in standards for teachers of English language learners. The following organizations have all developed such standards:

- National Association of Bilingual Education (NABE) Professional Standards for the Preparation of Bilingual/Multicultural Teachers (1992)
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) English as a New Language Standards (1998)
- Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) Standards for Effective Teaching Practice (1998)
- Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Pre-K-12 ESL Teacher Education Standards (forthcoming)

The standards listed here build upon general education program standards, such as those produced by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education, to specifically address the needs of ELLs. They include such features as proficiency in two languages, an understanding of the impact of students' cultures on their learning, and how to aid students in the development of their language abilities. Increasingly, standards are being used as the foundation for state licensure, teacher preparation and professional development programs to ensure that these programs are inclusive of the ELL population.

Professional Development for All Teachers

Although much research has been generated in support of bilingual education, ELLs typically spend most of their school day in the all-English-medium mainstream; programs such as ESL "pull-out" continue to pervade U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Additionally, there is little of the collaboration among teachers that would support diverse student needs (Sakash & Rodríguez-Brown, 1995). Therefore, cultivating a large pool of successful bilingual education and ESL teachers is not enough. To enable students who are ELLs to attain the same rigorous content as their grade-level peers requires all teachers to be prepared to work with this population.

ELLs in English-medium classrooms are not just responsible for the development of the cognitive skills necessary for them to grasp content material, but they must also focus on linguistic learning in order to access that content material. This entails acquiring new vocabulary, learning strategies, and culture-specific classroom

discourse. For mainstream teachers to meet these very specific needs requires that they:

- make academic content accessible to LEP students;
- integrate language and content instruction;
- respect and incorporate students' first languages in instruction; and
- understand how differences in language and culture affect students' classroom participation (Menken & Look, 2000, p. 22-23).

In planning effective educational programs for ELLs, it is important to consider these teacher behaviors and instructional approaches, and include mainstream teachers in high quality teacher preparation and professional development programs.

Balancing Quantity with Quality

The issue of teacher quality is at odds with efforts to quickly resolve the national shortage of teachers. Regarding teacher licensure, the teacher shortage undermines efforts to improve the quality of teachers by placing pressure on states and districts to: hire non-certified teachers, place teachers in positions for which they were not trained ("out-of-field teaching"), and avoid testing requirements. Effective teacher preparation and professional development offer the opportunity to improve the quality of teachers in U.S. public schools.

There have been major advances in the research in this area, and exemplary new programs created; in addition to the professional development work of CRESPAR already described, several other initiatives are shedding light on the needs of such programs. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE), for example, is currently compiling a national directory of exemplary preservice and inservice programs that effectively prepare ESL, bilingual, and mainstream teachers to work with linguistically and culturally diverse students. Research in this direction offers promising insights on the current successes and challenges for preparing teachers of ELLs.

However, the training that most teachers receive continues to be inadequate to meet the demands placed upon them. In their comprehensive investigation of research in this field, Diane August and Kenji Hakuta (1997) conclude:

... despite advances in some programs, the research on staff development and preservice programs concludes that there is a marked mismatch between what we know about effective professional development and what is actually available to most teachers. Although there has been a paradigm shift in theoretical approaches to professional development, these approaches are not well established in practice. For example, most inservice professional development continues to take the form of short-term, superficial workshops that expose teachers to various concepts without providing the depth of treatment or connection to practice necessary for lasting effects.
(August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 255)

It is evident that states must test teachers with useful assessment tools and do away with the numerous loopholes that allow the tests to be undermined and/or disregarded. Doing away with the state licensure loopholes, however, requires the creation of new incentives to attract and develop high-quality prospective teachers who are willing and able to teach. Such incentives include:

- offering dramatic financial incentives to teach such as tuition reimbursement and increased salaries;
- putting into place the necessary support structures to prepare new teachers to pass more demanding assessments and perform to high standards (such as those the Council for Basic Education is developing in their STAR program); and
- providing sufficient supports for new teachers once they are in classrooms to sustain them and curtail high turnover rates among new teachers.

By restoring distinction to the field through quality preparation and professional development, and offering at least some increase in salary to reflect this more extensive training, more individuals would be interested in teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Conclusion

Addressing the shortage of teachers is critical. Augmenting the quality of those teachers is equally important. The research studies mentioned above note the direct impact that teacher quality has on student performance. It is clear from this research that cultivating even *one* new teacher to perform to high standards impacts every student that teacher encounters during his or her career. Also clear is that the accurate assessment of these new teachers requires a better understanding of what effective teaching is. Organizations such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards are likely to guide this exploration in their articulation of teaching standards and their assessment of teachers' abilities. These efforts need to be evaluated and supported further.

Resource Guide

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